

Timed Writing Strategies: Techniques for Success

Writing to a Prompt

- 👂 In a timed writing situation, the major skill you are being tested on is your ability to write to a prompt (the exam question or task). In order to successfully respond to a prompt, you must do the following:
- 👂 Read the prompt several times, circle key words, and identify how many parts there are to the question
- 👂 Plan your response (essay)—in other words, outline, brainstorm, prewrite, cluster, etc.
- 👂 Stay focused on a central idea while answering the prompt

Reading & Understanding the Prompt

- 👂 The worst mistake you can make in a timed writing exam is to misread or misunderstand the question. Though you may feel rushed, crafting an accurate response requires you to know clearly where to begin.
- 👂 An effective strategy to be sure that you understand the prompt is to *circle, underline, or highlight key words* and *ask for definitions of unfamiliar words*.
- 👂 Some words you might find in timed writing prompts include:

Agree/Disagree – Take a position and stick with it—don't try to argue both sides equally. One side should be stronger.

Challenge – This term is synonym for disagree.

Compare/Contrast – Outline similarities between two sides or outline differences between two sides.

Compare & Contrast – The expectation is that you do both; don't just choose one.

Debate – Argue both sides of the topic. You should decide on a position so that one side comes out stronger in the end.

Illustrate – Make a point and use specific and detailed examples to support it.

Identify Parallels – This phrase is a synonym for compare.

Discuss or Explain – These terms are vague; you may be expected to complete any of the tasks listed above. Look for other key words to guide your response to the prompt.

Planning

- ♥ Again, you might feel the urge to rush ahead, to begin writing your essay immediately: DON'T! If you do, you will likely lose focus and end up with an unorganized, unfocused essay that leads nowhere but to a poor grade.
- ♥ Do NOT use the ideas that come to your mind right away—these are likely the same ideas that everyone else will think of as well. You want your essay to stand out and be original, so keep thinking until you come up with something unique.
- ♥ Determine your thesis right away. Your thesis will usually be your answer to the prompt. Your thesis should contain a *controlling idea* – a key word or phrase that limits the focus of the essay and expresses your opinion/attitude toward the topic. It should also contain an *overview of the main points* you will make. Make sure your essay follows the structure indicated in your thesis.

Example: If you were asked what your favorite spare-time activity is and why, you could answer “backpacking,” but this answer alone doesn't reveal your attitude toward the topic. In the sentence: “I enjoy backpacking in my spare time because it is both challenging and relaxing,” the descriptive words “challenging” and “relaxing” reveal both the writer's attitude about the topic and how the writer will focus the response by providing an overview of the main points he/she will discuss.

- ♥ Invest a couple of minutes in planning. Here are some strategies to help you:

Outlining – Write out your thesis statement and each of your main supporting points in full (or nearly full) sentences. This format is helpful for people who like clear structure.

Clustering – Put the topic or thesis at the center of the page and then write out supporting points and examples, branching out from the main point.

Listing – Similar to outlining but less structured; this method lets you put ideas down quickly in notes/points.

Weighing advantages/disadvantages, similarities/differences, etc. – When you're asked to debate something or to compare and contrast two ideas, draw a vertical line down the page, write a heading for each separate idea at the top of each page (on either side of the vertical line), and then list the main points for each side by side so you can compare them more easily.

Writing

✍ Once you've read the prompt carefully and have spent a few minutes planning, you're ready to begin writing.

NOTE: Students who spend time pre-writing/brainstorming consistently do much better than those who do not!

✍ Pace yourself: you'll only have a few minutes for each paragraph. Here are tips for writing each section of your essay:

Introduction – A creative start draws a reader in and makes them want to keep going. However, if a creative start doesn't come immediately to mind, skip it (but leave some space). Move directly to your thesis and then come back to write the introduction at the end.

Thesis Statement – You will want to make your thesis immediately clear to your reader, so it is best to put it in your introductory paragraph. You should DEFINITELY have a clear thesis written out before you write the essay.

Organization – Select an appropriate number of supporting points, depending on both your argument and your allotted writing time, and present them in a clear order, so the essay flows logically from one point to the next. Be sure to separate your main supporting points into distinct, separate paragraphs. NOTE: Keep in mind that you do not have to come up with exactly three examples to write about in your body paragraphs. Supporting your thesis with one or two well-developed examples can work better than including three that are undeveloped or incomplete.

Body Paragraphs – For each body paragraph, provide a topic sentence that gives a specific example to prove your thesis statement, and then focus the rest of the sentences in the paragraph on explaining the idea in the topic sentence. Remember to include BOTH general explanation of the idea AND specific details and/or examples to illustrate the general idea. Don't focus too much on one or the other: you want balance. To write a focused and unified essay, you must stay directly focused on your thesis: do not stray from it at any point in your essay.

Conclusion – Try to come up with a conclusion that does more than simply re-state your thesis and main points. However, unless your directions require one, a formal conclusion isn't always necessary. Your time might be better spent editing and proofreading your essay. For a conclusion, make sure you have at least restated your thesis (one sentence) and provide a closing thought, such as a question, a prediction, a warning, etc.—something to make your reader want to keep thinking about what you have said.

Editing & Proofreading

✂ Do not give yourself writer's block while writing your essay by doing things like wasting time trying to figure out where to put a comma or how to spell a word. Stay focused on the bigger task at hand: writing the essay! Then go back and try to fix errors.

✂ HOWEVER, you don't want to turn in an essay that contains excessive grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. Try to leave a few minutes to read through your entire essay, and try to edit your work in this order:

First... Look for any major structural or content errors first, such as misplaced sentences and vague points or explanations.

Then... Check for as many grammar, punctuation, or spelling mistakes as you can find.

Finally... Go back to your introduction to see if you can improve it and/or make your thesis clearer.

✂ Double-space your writing so that you have room to make corrections when you edit and proofread. Doing this leaves you room to cross out misspellings or confusing sentences and rewrite them. You will also have room to provide more detail and add examples if you find places where you feel you should do so.

Some Additional Advice

⇒ On **POINT OF VIEW...** Do **NOT** use the second person ("you") in your essay; this is considered immature writing and is not well received by professor. Use the first person (I, me, we, our, etc.) and/or the third person (students, people, teachers, etc.). You can switch between first and third person – use first person when describing any personal experiences and third person when giving general explanations and/or stories or descriptions that are not about you.

⇒ On **USING "RESEARCH"...** Do **NOT** make any references to outside sources such as "according to a recent study...", "a Chinese newspaper recently reported...", "a study was done..." etc. Timed writings are intended to be written from personal experience, opinion, and observation *only*. If you include information that seems to come from an outside source, professors generally interpret these passages as fake or made up and you will lose points for it.

⇒ On **WRITING AN INTRODUCTION...** Often, writing an introduction is the trickiest part of a timed writing assignment. Here are some strategies to begin your paper.

Give Background Information – When writing on a general subject, such as economic conditions in the U.S.A., give some background information to help inform your reader about the basics of your topic.

Define a Key Concept or Term – Beginning with a definition might be crucial to your reader’s understanding of your position on the prompt question. (However, avoid using a cliché opening like “According to Webster’s Dictionary...”)

Tell an Anecdote or Story – Only begin this way when you have an anecdote or story that is obviously and directly related to the topic at hand.

Ask a Question – Asking a question is the easiest way to begin an essay, but it is also the most clichéd. If you choose this method, try to come up with a creative question that will inspire your reader to read on.

Relate your Topic to Recent News or a Historical Event – Mentioning a recent, well-known event in your reader’s mind can establish a connection between the subject and your reader, and, therefore, spark the reader’s interest.

⇒ On **ORGANIZATION**... Here are some common methods that can help you to arrange the ideas in your essay.

Discuss Ideas in the Same Order as they are Listed in Your Thesis – If you choose to list the major points you will discuss in your essay in your actual thesis statement, make sure your body paragraphs follow that order exactly.

USE TRANSITIONS AND COHESIVE DEVICES! – Repeat key words from your thesis throughout your essay; also repeat key words from topic sentences within paragraphs. Don’t repeat exact wording (which is lazy); instead, use some synonyms.

Order of Climax – When ideas are presented in the order of climax, they build toward a conclusion and save the most important and dramatic examples for the end of the essay.

Order of Complexity – Ideas are ordered from simple to complex.

Order of Familiarity – Ideas are ordered from the most familiar to the least familiar.

Order of Audience Appeal – Points are ordered from “safe” (or more accepted ones) to challenging or surprising ones.

Order of Comparison/Contrast – Whether a comparison-contrast essay stresses similarities or differences, it may be patterned in one of two ways:

Block Style: Look at one subject completely, and then compare it another using the same points of comparison.

- I. Domino’s Pizza
 - a. Price
 - b. Quality
- II. Pizza Hut Pizza
 - a. Price
 - b. Quality

Point-by-Point Style: Look at the two subjects together, comparing one aspect at a time.

- I. Price
 - a. Domino’s Pizza
 - b. Pizza Hut Pizza
- II. Quality
 - a. Domino’s Pizza
 - b. Pizza Hut Pizza

You can also use the handout on rhetorical strategies and organization patterns (on the “Writing Handouts” page on wiki.)

⇒ On **DEVELOPMENT**... Here are some tips on writing well-developed paragraphs.

Begin by Introducing the General Topic and then State Thesis – see the section above on introductions.

Have a Topic Sentence for each Body Paragraph – each body paragraph should be clearly focused by a topic sentence that expresses a single point that supports the thesis. Remember to repeat this idea (in different words) at the end as well.

Provide Appropriate Support – for each paragraph by asking yourself “How do I know this is true?” Your answers to this question should help you to develop your paragraphs. Balance general explanation and specific details/examples

Provide Clear, Concrete Support –by including specific detail for each supporting point in the form of examples, anecdotes, illustrations, facts, personal knowledge, personal experiences, etc.

For example, if your thesis statement is “I enjoy backpacking because it is both challenging and relaxing,” perhaps your first point would be how you enjoy the physical challenge backpacking provides. A possible topic sentence could be: “Because I was born with asthma, I’ve always been afraid of strenuous physical activity, but when I started improving at backpacking, I realized that I could overcome this limiting fear.” A strong essay would then go on to provide a concrete example of when the writer came to this realization. Was it reaching the end of a difficult trail for the first time without having an asthma attack? Was it after suffering an attack and then carrying on ten miles in the rain to successfully reach his destination? Be as specific and detailed as possible in your support. If you can’t develop a point with evidence, then it’s probably best to replace that point with a stronger one.